

One of the early questions from my onboarding was, "What are they going to think about a hugging bishop?" Here we are together.

Thank you so much for marking this day, this day of my new role here among you. A special thanks is due to the Episcopacy Committee for planning this wonderful celebration. Thank you to my friends and colleagues from the Council of Bishops - Bishop Ward and Mike, Bishop Leeland and Janet for being present today - both of you very beloved by all of us here. To every one of you in this room representing our conference, thank you for coming and standing in for all of our people today. For every one of you watching right now from wherever you are, thank you for being part of the connection and I am coming your way, to your district event and I hope we can really get to know one another there.

And a huge thank you to my very cute husband, Joey, and our beautiful daughters, Bailey and Jessica, for making the 700-mile trek for this very brief weekend. I love you so very much. And Joey will be joining me in not too many more weeks and the girls will come and go because that's just what they do.

I've been here officially for five weeks today. 35 days! Right Josiah? We started together 35 days ago today! In many ways, it feels as if I've been here always, and yet in other ways, I feel as if I've come home to a place I've never been before.

When we previously moved to North Carolina to serve as Field Education Directors from 2005 to 2007, Bailey was 7 and Jessica was 2. As a child, Bailey would get a little homesick or have the blues when she got to school, and would convince her teacher that she was sick. They would call us and we would do an over the phone assessment and diagnosis to see if her call merited "checking her out of school" or simply encouraging her to take one class at a time and not get overwhelmed.

The day arrived when we were doing our first big Field Education Orientation where all the pastors, supervisors, and students paired for the summer were to gather in Goodson Chapel for preparation! It was our first orientation to plan and we were anticipating any disruption that may derail the day. As we dropped off 7-year-old Bailey

to Easley Elementary School, we offered these pre-emptive words, “Bailey, today is a really important day for mommy and daddy’s work. So only for today, we need you to stay all day at school. Please don’t call saying you’re sick. You can make it through the day. Ok? Even if you are sick, don’t call Bailey.”

“OK,” she said.

Around lunch, we get a call from Bailey’s teacher. The teacher says, “Bailey told me not to call you because no matter what, even if she was sick, she was not to call you today. But she has a fever of 102.” Friends, we were horrified! All the shame and guilt a mama can heap on herself came rushing in. I quickly tried to explain what we said to Bailey and why we had said that to Bailey. As we made arrangements to pick Bailey up from school, her teacher came to the car and said, “Mrs. Shelton, I always tell my parents that we need to agree: I’ll believe half of what your children say about you if you’ll believe half of what your children say about me.” We laughed and then I realized the need of grace and her grace found me that day.

North Carolina United Methodists, may we adopt such a practice? People may tell us things about each other. Let’s not be quick to judge or be drawn in. Let’s extend grace; let's extend understanding to one another.

I’m coming to you by way of Mississippi. And each time I’m required to apply for something new here in North Carolina - to turn on utilities or pick up a prescription at the pharmacy, I have to prove who I am. I have to demonstrate my identity. It’s a sobering reality to have to substantiate who you are.

Don’t get me wrong, I’m grateful for every employee of every establishment asking me for proof of identity - driver’s license, passport, Social Security card, health insurance card. I realize the privileged position I am in that I can prove my identity.

In the last congregation I served, Galloway UMC, (and I’m quite sure some of our family is participating with us in worship now), part of the ministry alongside folks who call the streets of Jackson home, was helping facilitate the process of obtaining an identification

card. Without a way to corroborate your identity, without an ID, access to support and resources was limited and practically non-existent.

Have you, Church, considered ministry as helping someone prove who they are... to help them on a path toward God's future? If you can't substantiate who you are, it's hard to live into your identity.

Hear the good news: Christ died for us while we were yet sinners. That proves, that substantiates, that demonstrates God's love toward us. Jesus died while we were yet sinners. What expansive, wondrous love is this - graceful hospitality - welcoming us before we had a clue. Our real identity is gifted to us by God, calling us "children" and claiming us as "friends" all in John's rendition of the Gospel. So maybe we have nothing to prove after all. God already proved God's love toward us. We receive God's gift without price.

Do you remember the promises we made when we became a part of The United Methodist Church? To be loyal to Christ through The United Methodist Church and do all in our power to strengthen its ministries; to faithfully participate in its ministries by our prayers, our presence, our gifts, our service, and our witness. My friend Rickey calls that the "High Five!" Prayers, presence, gifts, service, and witness. Our commitment to our identity - United Methodists - demonstrates for the world God's love through Jesus. Our behaved identity is our response to Jesus' question, "Do you love me?"

In our Gospel lesson from John 21 we just heard Rev. Yebuah read, we see Jesus' third appearance after his resurrection. Jesus asked Peter three times, much to Peter's annoyance, "Do you love me?" It's as if Jesus is asking Peter if Peter understands who he is. And the way to authenticate identity as those who love Jesus is to tend Jesus' lambs, feed Jesus' sheep. (We will save the distinctions of Jesus' three responses for another sermon for your pastor to do later. We won't break that down today.)

North Carolina United Methodists, we begin this journey today listening for the resurrected Jesus' voice right now again... Do you hear Jesus asking us, "Do you love me? Do you love me? Do you love me?" Our identity is recognized when we care for the

powerless and excluded - helping others prove who they are in Jesus Christ... to help them on a path toward God's future for them - like Jesus did in John's gospel - he included the excluded woman of Samaria, he brought sight to the blind, and he raised Lazarus from the dead!

Our love for Jesus is to join him in tending to the sheep by shining light into each person's identity in Jesus - by including and transforming and healing and raising! And even as I dove deeply into trying to exegete and nail down "who are the sheep here," (were you thinking that?) Who are the sheep here? I was drawn back eleven chapters in John where Jesus says, "Oh and by the way, I have other sheep." We want to put boundaries and have criteria for who Jesus is pointing toward, and then Jesus adds even more sheep.

Identity theft is real. People saying "I love Jesus" yet when Jesus says "care for people," there are justifications of why that is not a possibility.

It was the summer of 1996 when Joey and I were actually students at Duke Divinity School. I told you, we've been around awhile. We drove a 1977 rag top rust-infested International Scout. You could see the road through the front floorboard. One day, we were on a highway and we smelled smoke coming from Scout. We pulled over on the four lane. Joey had the front hood open peering in, when a vehicle came flying by us with a bull horn on top of the vehicle and the passenger yells over the bullhorn toward our stranded Scout, "Jesus loves you!" Jesus loves you. And then they kept going. We knew Jesus loved us. We needed someone who loved Jesus to come tow us.

When we don't care for the people for whom the world doesn't give a rip, we hear Jesus asking us a second and third and a fourth and a fifth time, "Do you love me?" In the same way and in some way, most of us are guilty of identity theft. We are not who we claim to be. We hear those words in our confessions: we have not loved our neighbors and we have not heard the cry of the needy. We have stolen the identity of Jesus' followers but are not behaving as those loved unconditionally by God.

Be very clear. Our behaved identity is not “works righteousness.” It’s acting congruently with what we say we believe - even if it causes us to change, let go of our preferences, and offer ourselves as a holy and living sacrifice in union with Christ’s offering for us.

When our baby girl, Jessica, was 7 years old, she launched into playing Upward basketball. We were so excited she was putting herself out there and she was really good - and really tall! The first few games, I found myself in true Connie form cheering loudly for each player as they made the shot or defended the ball. After the third game, young Jessica looked me in the eyes and said, “Mom, quit yelling during the games.” To which I defensively replied, “But I’m just encouraging each of you!” To which Jessica replied, “that may be what you think you’re doing, but it doesn’t feel like it.”

Friends, Jessica’s words linger with me. It doesn’t matter my “intention.” If others are not receiving what I’m intending, I have to change. It’s not enough for me to say, “well, that doesn’t matter because that’s not what I intended” or “that’s not what I meant, they just took me wrong.” I still have to be willing to be changed so that the other person hears a message.

Church, what are the messages we “intend” for the world to hear, but we’ve become so dogmatic that we aren’t willing to change so the message of God’s love is actually heard and experienced?

It is my prayer that Jesus’ question stays on our hearts and minds individually and in the heart and mind of every local church in the North Carolina Conference. Do you love me? For the sake of the Gospel and the sake of the world, may we act like it - living in unity, becoming healthy congregations and effective leaders, serving children, and committing to anti-racism practices and reflection.

This service today is extremely important for us to understand our broad and expansive connectional life across North Carolina and across the entire globe. And I am so grateful you know who you are. You know your identity in Jesus, and you express your love for Jesus by joining in his expressions of love - that we may be for the world the body of Christ redeemed by his blood! It’s gratitude for God’s claim on us, initiating us into

Bishop Shelton's Assignment Service Response

Bishop Connie Mitchell Shelton



North Carolina Conference
The United Methodist Church

Christ's holy church and incorporating us into God's mighty acts of salvation. By God's spirit, make us one with Christ, one with each other, and one in ministry to all the world. Thanks be to God! Amen!